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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: ARMENIA - ERDOGAN'S U.S. VISIT A SETBACK
FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The Armenian press, pro-government and opposition alike, expressed alarm at statements made by Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan, regarding rapprochement with Armenia, during his visit to the U.S. His comments linking ratification of the protocols on normalizing Turkey-Armenia relations to progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict led many to question Turkey's sincerity regarding ratification of the documents. There was also concern and skepticism regarding Erdogan's assertions that he could do nothing to convince the Turkish parliament to ratify the protocols absent progress in N-K. Some outlets took advantage of Erdogan's remarks to criticize the GOAM's diplomacy. Others criticized President Obama for failing to push back publically on Erdogan's linkage of the two processes. Television stations initially reported on the visit and showed politicians reacting to Erdogan's remarks, but then ceased their coverage. A credible source said they had been ordered to stop television reporting on the visit, perhaps because of the negative impact it was having on public opinion. Given the tiny circulation of Armenia's newspapers and the light TV coverage, the extent of the negative impact on public is hard to gauge. End summary.

DOUBTS ABOUT TURKEY'S SINCERITY, ARMENIA'S DIPLOMACY

2. (U) Pro-government HAYOTS ASHKHAR writes that neither the United States nor Azerbaijan expected to see such a tough position by Erdogan during his visit to Washington. By subjecting Armenian-Turkish negotiations to progress in Nagorno-Karabakh, the author believes Turkey is trying to set a trap for Armenia and make it look bad in the eyes of the international community. In another article, the paper discounts Erdogan's claim that he has no leverage over the Turkish parliament to approve the protocols. The author wonders whether the Armenian parliament might not come up with conditions of its own, mentioning genocide recognition among other possibilities. The article concludes that Turkey has no intention of normalizing relations with Armenia, since the Turkish side understands very well that Armenia will never agree to the "Erdogan" concept of rapprochement.

3. (U) Golos Armenii, a pro-government Russian-language paper,

asserts that Turks "only understand the language of threats, blackmail and ultimatums." Editor of opposition HAYKAKAN ZHAMANAK Nikol Pashinian, in a piece critical of Armenian diplomacy, opines that now, after the visit, the N-K issue will be central to the process of Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. Opposition 168 ZHAM writes sarcastically that, due to the "bright achievements" of Armenian diplomacy, the government has no clue what was discussed behind closed doors between President Obama and Erdogan. Editor of Centrist ARAVOT Aram Abrahamian believes that, henceforth, Turkey will be able to "insert" the N-K conflict in any conversation on Armenia-Turkey rapprochement.

DOUBTS ABOUT THE U.S. AS WELL

¶4. (U) Many in the press wondered about a perceived failure of the U.S. to push back when Erdogan made the linkage between normalization of ties with Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. HAYOTS ASHKHAR expressed surprise that President Obama, "who recently announced that there should be no preconditions for an Armenia-Turkey rapprochement," failed to respond to Erdogan's statements. ARAVOT's Editor Aram Abrahamian writes that the United States would never endanger its relations with Turkey for the sake of Armenia. AZG and HAYASTANI HANRAPETUTIUN quote an opposition Heritage Party MP saying that the lack of a response from President Obama is a bad sign. President Sargsian publically stated that he appreciated the U.S. role in Turkish-Armenian normalization and any blame lies with the parties themselves.

GAG ORDER ON BROADCAST COVERAGE?

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¶5. (SBU) Initially, there was widespread TV coverage of Erdogan's visit to the U.S. There was little commentary, but Armenian politicians were shown reacting to his remarks. Then, while he was still in the U.S., the coverage stopped. We received a report from a well-placed broadcast journalist that Presidential Spokesman Samvel Farmanian had given instructions to the stations to halt all coverage.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) Coverage of Erdogan's visit to the U.S. has probably served to increase suspicions of Turkey's intentions among the Armenian political class and lowered the public's receptivity to normalization of relations with Turkey. It put the government on the defensive, forcing Foreign Minister Nalbandian to deny before parliament that there were any pre-conditions or linkages to Nagorno-Karabakh in negotiating the protocols with Turkey. Given the lack of TV coverage after the first day, and the tiny circulation of Armenia's printed press, it is hard to assess the impact of the negative coverage and comments.

Yovanovitch